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ABSTRACT

Many prospective language arts teachers are unsure of what poetry really is. While it is impossible to present them with a definitive statement about the nature of poetry, they can be given a workable outline of the attributes of poetry to help them teach poetry to children. Rhythmic patterns can be emphasized to enhance children's enjoyment of poems if the burden of cognitive recognition of meter or syllabication is not overemphasized. Sound patterns, particularly rhyme or alliteration, appeal to children who enjoy the familiarity. Imagery, conciseness, and memorability are also qualities teachers can define for children. Poems selected for memorization must be only those that children appreciate and comprehend. The vitality of poetry and the timelessness of "old" poets can be accentuated through student interaction with a living poet or by pairing the works of contemporary poets with "older" poems. Poetry has special appeal for handicapped children. Both rhythm and form provide a structure in which children can participate, even though they may be denied active participation in rhythmic physical movement or in precise speech or writing because of their handicap. Poems of description or narration give children modes of expression which they may use in their own speaking or writing. Above all, poems should be given to children for enjoyment, in the hope that they will provide riches in years to come. (HTH)

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TEACHING POETRY FOR CHILDREN

Joan Stidham Nist

Years of instructing prospective language arts teachers in children's literature have indicated that the area where students are least prepared and most bewildered is that of poetry. An electric tension of resistance flows through a class when announcement is made that members should read (not study, not analyze, not explicate) a poem.

Part of the problem seems to be a reaction of fear to the unknown. Though poetry has been part of the curriculum for these students through fourteen or more years of schooling, they cannot give any definition of the word and therefore sense that they do not really know what it is. When asked, the most conscientious members of the class will flounder up with a text aphorism such as "melody and movement" or de la Mare's "tune and runningness." But ask them to further refine these terms, and they retreat into the protection of glazed-eye confusion.

It is impossible, of course, to present students with a definitive statement about the nature of poetry. Aristotle and his legacy of poetics through centuries of successors show the vast range of the topic. Nor does the dictionary help. A major desk volume (Random House) defines poetry as (1) "the art of writing poems" or (2) "poems collectively." Poem is defined as "a composition in verse, esp. a highly developed, imaginative one." To continue the lexicographic tautology, verse is defined as "(1) one of the lines of a poem, (2) a

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particular type of metrical line, (3) a poem or a piece of poetry," etc.

Students can, however, be given a workable outline of attributes of poetry which make it a distinctive form of language, an outline which provides them with a pragmatic description in concrete terms. The basic element of (1) rhythmic pattern can be emphasized to enhance pupils' enjoyment of poems if the burden of cognitive recognition of its variety (i.e., iambic pentameter; haiku syllabication) is not overemphasized. Rhythm is the essence of life itself: heartbeat, breathrate; even the spontaneous response of preschoolers to Mother Goose rhymes is due in great part to their vigorous rhythm. Technical terms like spondee and dactyl, caesura and sprung rhythm are the jargon of the art and craft of poetry. Poets use the techniques which the words delineate; aestheticians and critics use the terms to explicate poetry. The danger for teachers and students is that since the recall/recognition of such terms is easy to test and measure, they may assume a disproportionate (and possibly deadly) importance in the presentation of poems in the classroom.

Another basic element which, together with rhythm, helps students understand the nature of poetry is (2) sound pattern. Especially in the case of rhyme they feel a comfortable and enjoyable familiarity. The appeal of alliteration, whether or not children recognize it by that name, also is strong: youngsters respond to the tongue-rolls of "Amy Elizabeth Ermyntrude Annie" (Queenie Scott Hopper) as well as "The Pirate Don Durk of Dowdee" (Mildred Plew Meigs).

Other qualities of poetry which provide students with terms to define and appreciate it are (3) imagery, related to the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste, and feel, to which children are so keenly attuned; (4) conciseness, the compression of image and meaning into a distinctive structure of lines and stanzas (visual signs of aural patterns); and (5) its memorability (mnemonic quality). This last, of course, is what advertisers have seized upon with their verse jingles, the commercial "poor cousins" of poems. When successful, these ripple off the tongues of delighted tots and embed themselves in our subconscious to create a subliminal shopping list. By analogy, happy moments of classroom poetry should leave us with lifelong-remembered touchstones to brighten our feelings, scent our thoughts, and make palpable our ideas.

This leads to the question of whether students should be required to memorize poems. Ever since the advent of print, the process of bardic memory has steadily declined, and our age of computerized data banks proclaims it obsolete. As historical or scientific record, yes, it is outmoded. But because it is also artistic and humanistic, it retains validity and appeal. Part of the problem is misplaced emphasis: when memorization is made a coercive exercise (a certain number of lines assigned) rather than a leading into memory, through -- for instance -- choral speaking (repetition and choice). Poetic lines learned in childhood are remembered years later, showing the efficacy of the technique. When, however, pupils merely sound forth from parrot throats without comprehension, the exercise is

counterproductive. The poems selected must be worth the investment of memory; they must be those which children appreciate and comprehend.

Only in the past ten years has much academic recognition been given to children's literature as part of mainstream literary study, and children's poets have been among the last to share in this acknowledgement. (The NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children is notably junior to the Newbery, Caldecott, Wilder, National Book, IRA and other awards.) Though prospective teachers have met Robert Louis Stevenson in college literature classes, it has been as the author of essays or Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde -- with perhaps a condescending mention of Treasure Island as one of the greatest "boys'" books and seldom a word at all for A Child's Garden of Verses, the innovative volume which marks the beginning of modern poetry for children. Nor is his earlier contemporary, Christina Rossetti, accorded much more notice than that of being Dante Gabriel's younger sister, though one anthology (Norton, p. 1481) as an afterthought states that she is "perhaps the finest" woman poet of England.

These poets are "old": they lived, wrote, and died in the nineteenth century. They are not old, however, in the sense that their poems remain fresh to today's children. It is a significant indication of teaching practice, however, that one study (Chow Loy Tom, 1973) found that 90% of the poems most frequently read to children by teachers were over fifty years old. This imbalance against the work of modern

poets is indicative of teachers' insecurity in the area of poetry. They use "Paul Revere's Ride" (which the study found to be the most used poem) and other older verse probably because these were the poems most often taught to them as children. The teachers pass the poems along as keepsakes in the comfort of familiarity.

From a youngster's point of view, more recent poets, too, can be "old": for instance, twentieth-century poets who are no longer living. There is no possibility there of correspondence via a class letter to the poet (directed through the poet's publisher) or a phone hookup for group conversation (with prior arrangement of interview questions) -- ways to accentuate the vitality of poetry through student interaction with a living poet. One way to show the timelessness of "old" poets is to pair their work with that of contemporary living writers: Dorothy Aldis with Karla Kuskin, for example, Langston Hughes with Nikki Giovanni, or Harry Behn with Aileen Fisher.

Classroom mainstreaming of the handicapped points up a particular use for poetry. The special role of animals in children's literature reflects the affinity which children feel for creatures who share their dependence on the adult world. Especially for the handicapped child, animal literature can provide learning material which engages empathetic interest. When a teacher selects animal poems to share with students, children in general are attracted, but in addition, a special benefit accrues to the handicapped child because of the poem's rhythm and form. Both the rhythm and the form provide a

structure in which children can participate even though they may be denied active participation in rhythmic physical movement or in precise speech or writing because of their handicap.

Vachel Lindsay's "The Little Turtle" has long been a favorite. It provides vicarious activity: swimming in a puddle, climbing on rocks, hunting mosquito, flea, and minnow. But there is also humor and a sense of successful survival, for "he didn't catch me." In its three rhythmic quatrains there are varied language uses. Each line is a simple sentence of basic vocabulary. The poem incorporates rhyme, a feature which research has proved (Ann Terry, "Children's Poetry Preferences") is favored by children. Its sound echo not only appeals to their senses with its musicality but also provides cue reinforcement in the challenging puzzle of learning language. Lindsay's poem, like a cumulative tale, also provides repetition, which while advancing the narrative action allows for verbal recapitulation.

Poems of description as well as those of narration give children modes of expression which they may use in their own speaking and writing. Descriptive verse like Eleanor Farjeon's "A Kitten" can enhance a youngster's perception of words of action. For a disabled child, unable to dart, leap, or spring like others -- and like the kitten -- there are other equally monosyllabic if less strenuous moves: pat the air, cock an ear, or simply drop off to sleep. The description incorporates sound patterns of internal rhyme (darts/starts); alliteration (midget mew); assonance and consonance (runs around in rings,

sideways leaps he springs). The terms may be too technical to introduce to early grade students; the children's language development, however, is enhanced by recognition of the patterns themselves.

Charlotte Huck (Children's Literature in the Elementary School) has said this about children and poetry:

> . . . children want their poems to be simple, vivid, and to the point, much the same pattern that they demand of stories they read. Each poem should present one clear thought or image, or a succession of such thoughts. Children will accept poems they do not completely understand, such as the mysterious poems of Walter de la Mare; but they are not as tolerant about poetry that is vague and deliberately confusing.

De la Mare himself once said: "only the rarest kind of best in anything can be good enough for the young" (Bells and Grass). This must be true of the poetry presented to children. Whether the poems are humorous or narrative (the two favorite poetic modes of children), dramatic or lyric, they should be given to the children primarily for their enjoyment, with the hope that among them will be some which will provide remembered word-riches for years to come.

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